

*Sketches from  
My Boyhood*  
by Justinus Kerner



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Translated from the German with an Introduction by  
Harold B. Segel

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations .....	x
Note from the Translator .....	xi
Introduction .....	xii
Justinus Kerner and His Boyhood Memories	
 <i>Sketches from My Boyhood</i> <b>Justinus Kerner</b>	
Preface .....	1
My Birth and Early Years in Ludwigsburg. The Period of Duke Karl .....	3
Schiller in Ludwigsburg in 1793. His Defense of Duke Karl.	
Favorable Signs from the Life of This Prince.....	8
The Time of Duke Ludwig .....	13
My Ancestors .....	16
My Brother Georg .....	21
My Brother's Friendly Relationship with Adam Lux.....	37
My Brother Georg's Return to Ludwigsburg across Switzerland.....	45
My Brother Louis .....	48
My Brother Karl.....	51
The French Emigrants in Ludwigsburg and My Further Childhood There .....	51
Further Life at That Time.....	54

The Music Director Poli .....	63
The Mayor Kommerell .....	64
The Town Hall Servant Michel .....	65
The Civil Servant Vogel .....	65
The Rocket on the Kitchen Fireplace .....	66
My Father's Humor .....	68
Ludwigsburg's Desolation after the Death of Duke Ludwig .....	69
Departure from Ludwigsburg and Migration to Maulbronn in 1799 .....	71
My Life in Maulbronn, Its Teachers, Its Cloisters and Monastery Church ..	71
The Monastery Barbakan .....	73
Friend Gottfried and His Parents .....	75
Cousins and Sisters .....	76
The Coachman Matthias .....	77
The Monastery Walls and Their Antlions .....	79
The Town Hall .....	79
The Cloisters .....	81
The Summer Church .....	83
The Dormitory and Its Inhabitants .....	84
The Old Foundation Plaque of the Monastery .....	86
The Monastery Preachers .....	89
The Prelate's Wife with the Owl's Head .....	90

The Prelature Passageways and the Monastery Carriage with the Prelate Weiland .....	90
The Old Ghost in the Prelature .....	91
Doctor Faust and His Friend Prelate Entenfuss .....	93
My Stay in Knittlingen .....	94
Return to Maulbronn upon the Appearance of the French.....	96
The Professor in the Chimney .....	97
The French in the Town Hall.....	98
The Sauvegarde. My and My Father's Attitudes toward the French.	
My Brother Karl .....	99
My Illness .....	100
Stay in Brackenheim.....	101
St. Michael's Mountain .....	102
First Childhood Nature Study.....	104
The Trip to Heilbronn and the Miracle Doctor.....	105
The American Hippopotamus.....	108
A Wonderful Dancer .....	109
Gmelin the Magnetizer .....	111
The Rose Garden in the Churchyard .....	112
Magnetic Dreams and Gradual Recovery.....	113
Return to Maulbronn .....	117
The Future Relatives.....	117

The Farmer Rapp .....	118
My Brother Georg with Reinhard in Maulbronn .....	119
My Father's Illness .....	121
Father's Death .....	122
Dearest Wife!.....	123
Return to Ludwigsburg.....	124
My Brother Karl in 1799 and My School Years and Boyhood in that Same Year .....	125
My Brother Georg in Italy .....	126
On the Banks of the Anio .....	126
My Brother Louis and the Rebellion in Knittlingen .....	131
My Brother Karl and the Detentions in Ludwigsburg .....	132
Hegel's Sister .....	133
School and School Comrades .....	134
The Presence of the French and My Brother Georg in Ludwigsburg .....	136
Boyhood Games in Winter .....	140
The Camera Obscura in Moonlight .....	140
The Poet Conz .....	141
The Time of My Confirmation .....	142
My Stay at the Comptoir of the Textile Factory in Ludwigsburg.....	144
A Lost Comedy.....	148

The Originals in Ludwigsburg.....	150
The Foolish Family Tailor and Jung Stilling's Preterition .....	152
The Insane .....	154
Handicrafts and Further Engagement of My Mind While So Engaged ...	156
Walks. The Asperg Fortress, Wolf and Bilfinger. Nature Study .....	157
The Chemist Staudenmayer and His Friends.....	161
Frau von Gaisberg and Her Cats.....	162
Herr von Üxküll.....	163
The Painter Simanowitz and Two Other Friends.....	164
About My Siblings at That Time. My Sister Wilhelmine.....	166
My Brother Karl .....	168
My Brother Georg in Sweden.....	170
My Brother Georg's Letter from Lund of 6 August 1802 .....	171
My Entrance into the University.....	175

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Jacket picture: Maulbronn Monastery courtyard with fountain. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ neurobite

Weinsberg Marketplace after 1835. Lithograph by Brothers Wolf. Heilbronn (Ludwig Wolff, 1802-1868, and Friedrich Wolff, 1807-1850)

Ludwigsburg Favorit Palace. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ halpand

Ludwigsburg Palace. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ Anibal Trejo

Justinus Kerner Portrait 1852 by Ottavio d'Albuzzi. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons/ pd.

Ludwigsburg. Marketplace. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ halpand

Asperg Fortress, Asperg. MSeses / Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA-3.0.

Maulbronn Monastery courtyard with fountain. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ neurobite

Tübingen View of Old Town. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ wallpaper

## NOTE FROM THE TRANSLATOR

My desire to make the nineteenth-century German poet, physician, scientist, and parapsychologist, Justinus Kerner (1786-1862), more familiar to the English speaker comes to fruition with the present volume. My translation of Kerner's *Reiseschatten* (*Travel Shadows*, 1811), accompanied by an introduction situating Kerner's first literary text in the tradition of shadow theater in Germany, was published by Cambridge Scholars in 2014. Arguably Kerner's most endearing literary creation, the autobiography of his boyhood years—*Bilderbuch aus meiner Knabenzeit* (*Sketches from My Boyhood*, 1849)—is herein offered in the first English translation. It is hoped that these two books, *Travel Shadows* and *Sketches*, will be viewed as two parts of a single work encompassing the best of Justinus Kerner's non-medical and scientific oeuvre.

## INTRODUCTION

# JUSTINUS KERNER AND HIS BOYHOOD MEMORIES

By the time he came to publish his boyhood reminiscences in 1849, Justinus Kerner's fame had already been well established. He was not a titan of German poetry in the Romantic period, but his poems were read and admired and some set to music, securing his place in literary history. Kerner began his poetic writing while a student at the University of Tübingen, where he had come to study medicine and natural sciences. He published his first poems in 1813 and 1814 not long after the appearance in 1811 of his *Reiseschatten* (*Travel Shadows*). Ostensibly a travel narrative but in fact a work of vivid imagination—satirical, grotesque, romantic, at times surreal—*Travel Shadows* was inspired by the tradition of the Chinese shadow show of which Kerner had grown enamored. His aim was to structure a different kind of travel narrative along the lines of a shadow play with scenes moving rapidly by like the images on the shadow performer's screen.

During this same period, Kerner began his career as a rural doctor—with all the attendant hardships that entailed at the time—in towns within the general vicinity of his native Ludwigsburg, near Stuttgart. Doubtless anxious to advance his medical career, he published his first non-literary book in the same year his early poems appeared in the collective Tübingen volume *Deutscher Dichterwald* (German Forest of Poets). It was a well-written and enlightening account of the famous spa in the town of Bad Wildbad, Württemberg. After marrying his beloved Rickele—his life companion—also in 1813, Kerner settled permanently in the nearby town of Weinsberg. Before long, he became a highly respected member of the community and his house, built on land given him by the town of Weinsberg in recognition of the esteem in which he was held, soon became a virtual salon with visitors coming from near and far. These included the Italian artist Ottavio d'Albuzzi, who painted a portrait of Kerner in 1852 showing him holding his favorite musical instrument, a Jew's harp.



Weinsberg Marketplace after 1835. Lithograph by Brothers Wolf. Heilbronn (Ludwig Wolff, 1802-1868, and Friedrich Wolff, 1807-1850

As his medical career unfolded, Kerner demonstrated a capacity for original analysis and, at the same time, the ability to put his findings and observations in literary form. This is evident in his ground-breaking treatise on sausage poisoning, in which he first described the symptoms of the botulism toxin, *Das Fettgift oder die Fettsäure und ihre Wirkung auf den thierischen Organismus* (The Fat Poison or Fatty Acids and Their Effect on the Animal Organism, 1822). Before much time elapsed, it became obvious that Kerner's medical interests were shifting more and more away from the body to the mind. Reading his boyhood reminiscences in *Sketches*, it is easy enough to trace this newer direction back to his youthful fascination with supernatural and psychic phenomena, as in such entries as "The Prelature Passageways and the Monastery Carriage with the Prelate Wieland," "The Old Ghost in the Prelature," "Doctor Faust and His Friend, Prelate Entenfuss," "The Trip to Heilbronn and the Miracle Doctor," "The Magnetizer Gmelin," and "Magnetic Dreams and Gradual Recovery." Although a boy's attraction to ghost stories would seem a normal part of growing up, more enduring would be Kerner's early experience with magnetism and magnetic therapy—the ideas, in other words, of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), the originator of animal magnetism and a fellow Swabian about whom Kerner later wrote a biography. Of relevance as well were those members of the Kerner

family who fell into insanity, which he mentions in his narrative but does not dwell on.

Once he adopted the methods of magnetic therapy, Kerner first applied them to his treatment of somnambulists, often referred to as sleepwalkers. What attracted Kerner most to somnambulism were the visionary and clairvoyant revelations experienced during trances. His first work on the subject appeared in 1824 under the title *Geschichte zweyer Somnambülen nebst einigen anderen Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem Gebiete der magischen Heilkunde und der Psychologie* (The History of Two Somnambulists Together with Other Accounts from the Sphere of Magical Healing and Psychology). Kerner's case study method in The History of Two Somnambulists was used on a more grandiose scale in the book that made him famous in Germany and abroad: *Die Seherin von Prevorst: Eröffnungen über das innere Leben der Menschen und über das Hereinragen einer Geisterwelt in die unsere* (first published 1829, revised 1832), which was translated into English by the British novelist, Catherine Crowe, under the title *The Seeress of Prevorst: Being Revelations Concerning the Inner-Life of Man and the Inter-Diffusion of a World of Spirits in the One We Inhabit* (1845). The "seeress" was Friederike Hauffe (1801-1829), who lived in the small village of Prevorst, a few miles from Weinsberg. She suffered from convulsions and other ailments and believed herself possessed by spirits. She was also given to clairvoyant visions and predictions and in general exhibited a variety of psychic phenomena. Kerner was called in to treat her in 1825, and she became both his most famous case and the basis of his renown. His exhaustive account of his relationship with her makes often for compelling reading owing to two factors, principally: firstly Kerner's own inclination to believe in psychic phenomena, in the occult and supernatural, which made him more than just a dispassionate medical practitioner harboring a certain degree of skepticism about the apparitions and visions of his patient; and secondly his transformation of the myriad of experiences during Hauffe's treatment into a sustainable narrative.

Thus by the late 1840s, when Kerner undertook the writing of *Bilderbuch aus meiner Knabenzeit* (*Sketches from My Boyhood*), his life's work was nearing its end. Apart from a book about Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) published in 1856 and consisting to a great extent of Kerner's recollections of him, he also brought out two new collections of poems published in 1852 and 1859—*Der letzte Blüthenstrauss* (The Last Bouquet) and *Winterblüthen* (Winter Blossoms); but these were not on the level of his earlier poetry. Curiously, his most intriguing later work was a collection of ink blot drawings which he called *Klecksographien* and

which circulated privately before being officially published in 1890 after his death. In his later years, Kerner's eyesight began failing and he became partially blind, yet stubbornly refusing any recommended cataract surgery. As he tried to maintain his writing, he became aware of drops of ink falling onto the page and then had the idea of working these into drawings for which he wrote appropriate poems, in the manner of Baroque figure poetry. Typically, most deal with common themes in Kerner's poetry—death, the devil, and Hades—but were not wholly bereft of humor. They remain to this day one of Kerner's most widely circulated works.

Kerner retired from his medical practice in 1851 and lived mainly on pensions granted him by the kings of Württemberg and Prussia in recognition of his past services. He died eleven years later. With his medical career soon to end, his eyesight beginning to fail, and his major contributions to medicine and literature behind him, Kerner occupied himself with the writing of his book of boyhood memoirs.

The Romantic movement, in Germany as elsewhere, took a new interest in childhood resulting in the appearance of a plethora of literary texts extolling the innocence and naturalness of the child. Viewed in this light, the figure of the child became a worthy subject of artistic as well as philosophical attention. In the German context, this culminated most famously in the publication of Goethe's monumental autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, 1811-1833). Goethe began writing it in October 1809 not long after he had reached his sixtieth birthday. He was born in August 1749 and died in March 1832. He continued working on *Poetry and Truth* from 1811 to 1813 but then took a hiatus of seventeen years, from 1813 to 1830. The fourth and last part of the book was in fact published posthumously by Goethe's secretary, Johann Peter Eckermann, in 1833. *Poetry and Truth* is divided into four parts, each of which is further subdivided into five books. The work as a whole encompasses twenty-six years of the poet's life, from the time of his birth to his departure for Weimar in 1775 where he spent the rest of his life at the court of Duke Karl August in the most creative period of his career.

Kerner was certainly aware of Goethe's work and may indeed have been inspired by it. This awareness is obvious in remarks he makes early in *Sketches* clearly intended to distance it from *Poetry and Truth*:

“So light are they still in my memory, these experiences of my youth are also presented herein in their pure truth *without any poetic embellishment* [ohne eine poetische Ausschmückung].

I have been guilty of the latter only on one page, which I comment on in the very same place so as not to mislead the reader.

There are also no poems (no Poetry and Truth, no Travel Shadows) to be found in these pages. They contain unadorned and true experiences [ungeschmückte und wahre Erlebnisse] . . .”<sup>1</sup>



Ludwigsburg Favorit Palace. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ halpand

Contrasting his own boyhood memoirs with those in Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, Kerner is suggesting that Goethe engaged in just such “poetische Ausschmückung” which he himself, however, eschews. His references to “Poetry and Truth” and his own *Travel Shadows* of 1811 reinforce this distinction. Should the reader fail for some reason (unlikely) to associate the remark about “poetic embellishment” with Goethe's text, Kerner leaves no doubt as to his intention with specific mention of “Poetry and Truth” a few lines later. The allusion to his own *Travel Shadows* is a reminder of Kerner's ability to write works of robust imaginative power when so inclined, but that the grotesque and surreal elements of *Travel Shadows* have little place in *Sketches*.

What Kerner may have had specifically in mind in his obvious references to Goethe's “poetische Ausschmückung,” we may not know

<sup>1</sup> Justinus Kerner, *Bilderbuch aus meiner Knabenzeit* (Insel Verlag: Frankfurt am Main, 1978), 10.

precisely; but it is also a notice that he was probably alluding to recalled conversations in Goethe's narrative, the instances Goethe cites of his growing popularity and even esteem as a young poet, his remarkably detailed and lengthy descriptions of the pomp and ceremony of public celebrations and, no doubt, Goethe's romantic adventures, above all his infatuation with his Gretchen about whom doubts have arisen in recent times as to her authenticity.

Despite Kerner's implied disclaimers, *Sketches* and Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* are not essentially dissimilar. *Poetry and Truth* is a considerably larger, more detailed work than *Sketches* and was much longer in the making. By contrast, Kerner's shorter *Sketches* was published in 1849, thirteen years before his death in 1862. Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* was certainly a more ambitious undertaking than *Sketches*, addressing not only Goethe's formative years but also the development of his literary and artistic views in the larger context of German language and literature in his own time. Poetic creativity was Goethe's passion and it comes as no surprise that his growing awareness of and cultivation of his own genius, above all as a poet, would form a significant part of *Poetry and Truth*. On a much smaller scale, and although devoted to medicine and science more than to imaginative writing, Kerner, like Goethe, fondly recalls his fascination with poetry, his early attempts to write it and how, during his long hours of dreary mechanical work in a textile factory, his only solace was in writing poems. And like Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*, Kerner's *Sketches* contains specimens of his youthful verse as well as of his storytelling. Both writers duly record their family backgrounds, early schooling experiences, childhood entertainments (the puppet show bequeathed by Goethe's grandmother and his growing fascination with theater, Kerner's kite-flying and experiments with a camera obscura), dreams, childhood illnesses, fondness for nature, indifference to formal religion, local city or town life, and contemporary political and military conflicts. But Goethe's more cosmopolitan, well-to-do home environment helped shape his outlook on art and literature and the greater world around him. A respected civil servant of modest income, Kerner's father lacked—and therefore could not impart to his children—the senior Goethe's love of the arts and literature. Moreover, his father's familiarity with another European culture, in this case Italian, kindled an interest in the young Goethe that remained with him for the rest of his life. Kerner's father never travelled abroad nor did Kerner himself. Yet in later years, once his fame spread far and wide on the basis of *The Seeress of Prevorst*, Kerner's house in Weinsberg hosted visitors from all over Europe. And Kerner reminds his readers in *Sketches* that as a boy he not only studied classical

Greek and Latin in school but also familiarized himself with, and translated, French and Italian poetry.

Another German autobiographical narrative of youth familiar to Kerner was Johann Heinrich Jung's *Heinrich Stillings Jugend* (*Heinrich Stilling's Youth*, 1777). Johann Heinrich Jung (1740-1817) is better known under his pen name Heinrich Stilling or Jung-Stilling. A figure Kerner most surely would have known, Jung-Stilling was a physician trained at the University of Strasbourg, where he and Goethe became close friends. It was, in fact, Goethe who made possible publication of Jung-Stilling's *Youth*. Stilling's reputation as a physician is based on his work as an eye doctor whose specialty happened to be cataracts. Given Kerner's failing eyesight and refusal to undergo cataract surgery, he would indeed have been drawn to Jung-Stilling. There were other reasons for Kerner's interest as well. Jung-Stilling was an authority on plants, a subject dear to the nature-loving Kerner, and published a textbook about them in 1785. He was also a Pietist and a writer on Protestant religious subjects whose influence was especially strong among the Mennonites many of whom carried his beliefs with them when they migrated to South Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Kerner's boyhood familiarity, through his father, with Johann Georg Rapp (1757-1847), the founder of the religious sect known as the Rappists or Harmonites, would have inclined him, however superficially, to this aspect of Jung-Stilling's career.

Jung-Stilling's most notable literary work, apart from his autobiographical writings, was the four-volume novel *Heimweh* (Homesick), about the Christian pilgrimage, which he published between 1794 and 1796. He also had an interest in somnambulism and the spiritual world and is cited in Catherine Crowe's *The night-side of nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost-seers* (1848). Crowe, it may be remembered, was the English translator of Kerner's *The Seeress of Prevorst*.

Jung-Stilling's appeal to the young Kerner is reflected in the piece in *Sketches* titled "Der närrische Hausschneider und Jung Stillings Vorübergehen" ("The Foolish Family Tailor and Jung-Stilling's Preterition"). He recalls that the first time he saw Jung-Stilling was when the latter and his wife came to visit the orphanage in Ludwigsburg near the textile factory where Kerner was then employed. His first impression was of "the long interesting form with its own high forehead, aquiline nose, and eyes radiating love and kindness" (252-53). Although he had a slight knowledge of Jung-Stilling's "Pythagorean and Platonic beliefs about the

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<sup>2</sup> On this, see Waldemar Gutsche, *Westliche Quellen des russischen Stundismus* (Kassel: J. G. Onchern Verlag, 1956) and P. M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland* (1789-11910) (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1911).

transmigration of souls and a middle kingdom,” he was for the most part unfamiliar with his Christian views. Perhaps of greater interest to Kerner at the time he wrote *Sketches* was Jung-Stilling’s unsuccessful cataract operation on the famous blind instrument maker, Karl Heinrich Käferle (1768-1834).

A probable inspiration for Kerner’s *Sketches*, like Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth*, Jung-Stilling’s autobiography is a quite different work. Narrated throughout in the third person, it runs to four or five separate books, depending on the edition, and traces the author’s life and career from birth into a much more modest family than either Goethe or Kerner until he moved permanently to Karlsruhe in 1806 upon receipt of a pension from Grand Duke Karl Friedrich of Baden after resigning from his professorship at the University of Heidelberg. In his later years, Jung-Stilling was much admired for his Christian teachings and his embrace of universalism.

The most relevant parts of Jung-Stilling’s autobiography for any comparison with Kerner’s *Sketches* are *Heinrich Stilling’s Jugend* (*Heinrich Stilling’s Youth*, 1778),<sup>3</sup> which extends from the marriage of his parents (Wilhelm, a tailor, and Doris, the daughter of the preacher and alchemist Moriz) to the death of his maternal grandfather when he was eleven years old, and *Heinrich Stilling’s Jünglingsjahre* (*Heinrich Stilling’s Youthful Years*, 1778), wherein Heinrich’s four-year residence in a Latin school and the hardships he endures in his pursuit of a career as a schoolteacher are described. The second part ends with the death of his mentor, Pastor Stollbein, and Heinrich’s departure at age twenty for the commercial city of Schönenthal (read Elberfeld). The rest of the autobiography consists of the volumes *Heinrich Stilling’s Wanderschaft* (*Heinrich Stilling’s Wandering*, 1778), *Heinrich Stilling’s häusliches Leben* (*Heinrich Stilling’s Domestic Life*, 1789), and *Heinrich Stilling’s Lehrjahre* (*Heinrich Stilling’s Apprenticeship*, 1804).

When we compare Kerner’s *Sketches* with Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth* and Jung-Stilling’s five-part autobiography, the differences are inescapable. Jung-Stilling’s book is a chronologically straightforward account narrated in the third person. *Poetry and Truth* and *Sketches* are first-person narratives and do not follow a strict chronological order. In size and scope, Kerner’s *Sketches* is the smallest of the three. It lacks Goethe’s immense

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<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Stilling’s multipart autobiography is available in English translation in a single volume by E. L. Hazelius published in 1831 by the Theological Seminary of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania; in two volumes translated by S. Jackson and published in 1836 by Hamilton Adams, London; and in a single volume by the same translator published in 1844 by Harper & Brothers, New York.

preoccupation with his own creative genius, the arts, and learning, and Jung-Stilling's interest in domestic routine as well as his overriding pietism and religiosity in general. All three of the relevant volumes end with the central figure's departure at a young age for a new life in a different setting. Goethe leaves for Weimar in 1775. Heinrich Stilling leaves for the commercial town of Elberfeld on Easter Day 1772 and yet another chapter in his troubled life as a schoolteacher before eventually becoming a famous eye doctor and a professor at the University of Marburg. At the end of *Sketches*, Kerner is eighteen years old and about to enter the University of Tübingen, also to study medicine but soon to become a member of the Swabian literary circle that included such prominent poets as Ludwig Uhland, Gustav Schwab, and Eduard Mörike.

Composed of eighty-six generally short word pictures from his boyhood, Kerner's book eschews chronological order. However, like Goethe and Jung-Stilling, he does begin with his family background and birth in the city of Ludwigsburg. Much smaller than Goethe's birthplace, Frankfurt-am-Main, yet certainly larger than the Westphalian village of Grund in which Jung-Stilling first saw the light of day, Ludwigsburg has a special place in Germany as the seat of what became the Kingdom of Württemberg in 1804 and the site of the magnificent palace of Ludwigsburg erected in the time of Duke Eberhard Ludwig von Württemberg (1676-1733).

Ludwigsburg is only a few miles north of Stuttgart and near the Neckar River. As European cities go, it is not very old. It dates back to the early eighteenth century when Duke Eberhard visited the court of Louis XIV at Versailles and was so impressed by what he saw that he decided to create his own Versailles not far from his native Stuttgart. In 1704 he laid the foundation of the Ludwigsburg Palace which now enjoys the distinction of being the largest Baroque palace in Germany. Several years later, as the vision of his realm expanded, he augmented the Ludwigsburg Palace complex by adding the small but charming Favorit (1713-1728), which was designed as a richly wooded hunting and pleasure palace, and finally the Seeschloss, or Palace on the Lake, to which he gave the name Montrepas (1764-1768), the least distinguished of the three but with the advantage of being built alongside a fairly large man-made lake. To this day, it is these structures—in relatively close proximity to one another and attesting to the grandiose ambitions of a would-be absolutist ruler—that remain the principal attractions of the city of Ludwigsburg. Whatever the appeal the ducal palaces may have had for the young Kerner, it was undoubtedly dwarfed by Ludwigsburg's market place with its arcades well suited to children's games. Its centerpiece is the large fountain with a

statue of Duke Eberhard Ludwig atop it and, almost directly opposite each other across the square, the twin-towered (Protestant) Stadtkirche (Town Church, 1718-1726) and the less elaborate Catholic Dreieinigkeitskirche (Trinity Church, 1721-1727). The square is also home to the Oberamtei or town hall where Justinus Kerner was born and where his father held the office of chief district officer.



Ludwigsburg Palace. Courtesy Can Stock Photo/ Anibal Trejo

Beginning in 1800, Württemberg was engulfed by the shock waves of the French Revolution with sometimes disastrous consequences. It was occupied by an army under the command of Napoleon Bonaparte and was forced into an alliance with France. In 1806, the Kurfürst (Prince-Elector) Friedrich was made king of Württemberg by Napoleon. In 1812, the Württembergian army was raised in Ludwigsburg for Napoleon's Russian campaign. Of the 15,800 Württemberg soldiers who served, only a few hundred returned.

The entry of the French military in Ludwigsburg was no source of fear to the young Kerner, any more than the appearance of French troops in Frankfurt-am-Main was frightening to the young Goethe. On the contrary, Kerner was fascinated by the French and made friends among them. He describes his experiences with French soldiers and his impressions of them in such sketches as "Return to Maulbronn upon the Appearance of the

French,” “The French in the Town Hall,” “The Sauvegarde. My and My Father’s Attitudes toward the French,” and “The Presence of the French and My Brother Georg in Ludwigsburg.” Military personnel were not the only French arrivals in Ludwigsburg during Kerner’s youth. There were also the French emigrants fleeing the terror in revolutionary France, and Kerner describes some of them in the piece “The French Emigrants in Ludwigsburg and My Further Childhood There.”

Goethe’s account of the movement of French military forces through Frankfurt-am-Main is more expansive and less light-hearted than what Kerner writes of their comings and goings in Ludwigsburg. In recalling his boyhood years, Kerner was personally less interested than Goethe in dealing directly with the tumultuous politico-military events of the time. Rather, they are viewed through the eyes of a youngster fascinated by the men in strange uniforms speaking a different language. Instead of being repelled by them, he was drawn to them. But the broader consequences of the events in France on Germany are not ignored. Rather they are conveyed by other principals in his narrative—his older brothers Georg (1770-1812) and Karl (1775-1840), both distinguished in their own right and to whom Kerner was deeply attached.

As an early enthusiast of the French Revolution who later turned against it, Georg looms large in Kerner’s memoirs. Kerner admired him greatly, making him into a truly heroic figure of almost legendary stature and in this respect perhaps violating his own eschewal of Goethe’s “poetic embellishment.” Clearly a man of courage and daring who was in the thick of some of the major political and military events of the time, Georg would undoubtedly have had a great appeal to his youngest brother’s imagination. Relying to a certain extent on preserved letters and other documents—which are extensively quoted—*Sketches* includes a few fairly substantial pieces on Georg including one recounting his close friendship with the German revolutionary, Adam Lux (1765-1793). Lux was an ardent supporter of the French Revolution who subsequently rejected it because of the excesses of the Terror and who died on the guillotine. On 17 July 1793, Lux witnessed the execution of Charlotte Corday, the assassin of Jean-Paul Marat, and published pamphlets lauding her action as an act of liberation. He threatened at one time to commit suicide in front of the National Convention in Paris, but changed his mind and went to the guillotine protesting the mindless violence into which the Revolution had degenerated.

Georg was often used for diplomatic missions by the Württemburg-born French diplomat, Karl Friedrich Reinhard (1761-1837), whose private secretary he became. Georg accompanied Reinhard when he served

as French Minister Plenipotentiary to the German Hanseatic cities, and later to the Duchy of Tuscana. Georg eventually became a medical doctor (and model for his younger brother) and was affiliated with a hospital in Hamburg, Germany. On his year-long “Grand Tour” through Germany and Austria following his graduation from the University of Tübingen in 1808, Kerner in fact visited his brother in Hamburg and spent some time with him. Again yielding to his deep respect for his elder sibling, Kerner inserts into his narrative two longish pieces by Georg himself, one describing his impressions of Rome, which he visited on a diplomatic mission for Reinhard, the other a letter written in 1807 after he had fled to Sweden in the aftermath of the failed military campaigns against the French and Austrians.

Kerner’s brother Karl also evoked his admiration, and with good reason. He had a brilliant military career as an artillery officer, eventually becoming a general in Napoleon’s army during the Russian campaign in which he was wounded at the battle of Borodino. Later, as interior minister of Württemberg, he became a pioneer there in the modernization of metallurgy. Kerner has much less to say about his second eldest brother, Louis (c. 1773-?), who wanted to be a tradesman but, under pressure from Kerner’s father, instead chose a career in the church. He held the position of parochial vicar in the small town of Knittlingen, near Maulbronn, the presumed birthplace of the historical Faust, and where he was a witness to the so-called Knittlingen Rebellion of August 1801. Kerner’s mother was fearful that he would become involved and end up a prisoner in the ancient Asperg fortress and prison near Stuttgart. But he suffered no consequences as a result of the Knittlingen turmoil and in fact soon became the Asperg Fortress vicar.

Other family members of whom Kerner writes are of course his devoted and anxious mother, his father, his grandparents, his cousins and sisters, in particular his sister Wilhelmine. The portrait that Kerner draws of his father, a high district official in Ludwigsburg, is that of a principled civil servant, a devoted albeit stern father, a man capable of humor, and a great lover of nature after whom Kerner patterned himself. For the sake of his education, Kerner moved with his family to the nearby town of Maulbronn—located between Heidelberg and Stuttgart—where he became a student in the Maulbronn Protestant monastery. The best preserved Cistercian monastery complex in Europe, it was founded in 1147. Since 1993, it has been on UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites. Kerner devotes over a dozen sketches to the monastery complex itself, its famous cloisters and barbican, its student life, its teachers, and its hauntings. A few have a humorous component such as the one about the prelate’s wife with the owl head, the eerie passageways of the prelature, and the monastery

carriage. In depicting the seminary education of his ill-fated central character, Hans Giebenrath, in his 1906 novel *Unterm Rad* (*Beneath the Wheel*), Herman Hesse also drew inspiration from the Maulbronn monastery. Given his fondness for Kerner and his literary work, it is certainly possible that Hesse was led to his subject by Kerner's *Sketches*.



Justinus Kerner Portrait 1852 by Ottavio d'Albuzzi. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons/ pd.

As in his *Travel Shadows*, Kerner could not resist the attraction of the eccentric and bizarre and clearly took much pleasure in fashioning images of Ludwigsburg “originals” remembered well into older age. And so we meet the foolish family tailor, the chemist Staudenmayer, who devised substitutes for just about everything, Frau von Üxküll, the cat lover, and others. He also sketched memorable portraits of characters such as the family coachman Matthias, the swindler Nast who tries to peddle a hairless, eyelash-less horse as an American hippopotamus at the Frankfurt Fair, the magnetizer named Gmelin, and the farmer Georg Rapp, the Pietist who was befriended by Kerner’s father and eventually migrated to America where he and his followers established colonies in the small town of Harmony, Pennsylvania, and in southern Indiana.

The prison and insane asylum located near the textile factory where the young Kerner was briefly employed before entering the University of Tübingen both attracted and repelled him. He writes about these in such entries as “My Stay at the Comptoir of the Textile Factory in Ludwigsburg,” “Handicrafts and Further Engagement of My Mind While so Engaged,” and “The Insane.” Kerner was able to visit both prison and insane asylum, apparently on more than a single occasion, and it is possible that these visits—perhaps even more than his boyhood imaginings of ghosts and haunted passageways—kindled his later deep involvement in the occult and supernatural.

Kerner’s decision to study medicine in Tübingen was finalized, he claims in the last entry in *Sketches*, by a doctor’s prescription that fluttered through a window into his room. To Kerner, this was a sign that he was destined to pursue a career in medicine which indeed he did.

Kerner’s enthusiasm for imaginative writing, like Goethe’s, showed up at an early age. In *Sketches*, without extolling their virtues, he publishes eight small poems under the title “Poems from My Boyhood.” Thematically and stylistically they adumbrate Romantic motifs in his more mature poetry with their preoccupation with death, particularly the death of the young, and nature. After publishing several volumes of well-received verse in his lifetime, Kerner may be pardoned (like Goethe) his nostalgic look back at his fledgling efforts when he was composing *Sketches*. The same can be said for the entry “A Lost Comedy,” an outline of a four-act drama about a swindle perpetrated against clerics by a suave Jewish con man. Kerner’s interest in theater can be traced back to his visits to marionette shows (an enthusiasm he shared with Goethe) as well as Chinese shadow plays during his university years and not long afterward during his extended trip through Germany and Austria. His first work of imaginative literature, *Travel Shadows* (1811), includes a few

dramatic sketches inspired by the ancient art of the Chinese shadow show. In 1817, he published a political play, *Der rassende Sandler* (The Raging Vagabond), which he subtitled “Ein politisches dramatischer Impromptu, mit Marionetten auszuführen” (A Political Dramatic Impromptu, To be Performed with Marionettes), further attesting to his interest in marionette theater. In 1837, he also published his own full-length shadow play, *Der Bärenhäuter im Salzbad* (The Bearskin Man in the Spa).

Kerner’s *Travel Shadows* of 1811 and his vastly different *Sketches from My Boyhood* of 1849 represent his principal contributions to German creative writing in the nineteenth century. The mask of exuberant imagination Kerner donned for the humorous and grotesque scenes in *Travel Shadows* concealed from public view his serious inclination toward the depressive, hints of which appear in *Sketches*. But these are hints only which in no way compromise the casual and genial nature of *Sketches*. Humor is pervasive in *Sketches from My Boyhood*, and many of the scenes Kerner paints are memorable. Combining a keen eye for detail and a knack for creating vivid word pictures, Kerner’s *Sketches from My Boyhood* brings to life the early years of an outstanding figure in the cultural history of the palace town of Ludwigsburg and of Swabia as a whole in the tumultuous Napoleonic era. It was a far less grandiose undertaking than either Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth* or Jung-Stilling’s autobiography, but it was never meant to be either a large multivolume work or to extend beyond the pre-university years. It is a comfortably sized volume, easy in the reading because of its division into over eighty “Bilder” or “pictures”—sketches, in other words. When *Travel Shadows* was published in 1811, there were those who faulted Kerner for his seeming inability to move beyond the fragment in the design of a literary work. And there were still others who ascribed the appeal of *Travel Shadows* largely to this “fragmentariness.” Kerner knew what he was doing hence the title for his boyhood memories, *Bilderbuch aus meiner Knabenzeit*. The memories are evoked as sketches with an eye for the visual. It was in this way that his youthful memories could be set apart from such weighty tomes as Goethe’s *Poetry and Truth* and Jung-Stilling’s *Life*. The picture that emerges of Kerner himself in *Sketches from My Boyhood* is that of a bright, inquisitive, talented, and fun-loving youth who already had intimations of the dark side of life.

# *SKETCHES FROM MY BOYHOOD*

JUSTINUS KERNER

## Preface

I should like to leave behind these recollections of my boyhood as a friendly memento to the many people who became my friends and acquaintances in this life.

To be sure, there is only a little they can offer them from my own life. The life of a boy, mostly in tranquil circumstances, in the lap of and under the protection of his parents, presents perhaps little out of the ordinary; but I have treated my own life here as just a thread on which images from the worthier life of others who once touched me have been strung as, for example, those from the life of my brother, Georg. The most eventful part of his life fell in the time of my boyhood, the time of the French Revolution. From the time he left the Academy in Stuttgart, with all the enthusiasm of a youthful soul dreaming only of freedom and human betterment, he threw himself into the arms of the Revolution and lived through all its terrors in Paris the entire time, first as a Jacobin, then, after they revealed themselves to be murderers of freedom and terrorists, as their zealous opponent. In an appendix to these Sketches from My Boyhood, I have related his later life—the time when he was awakened by Napoleon from his dreams of republican freedom, that same freedom that the French people themselves gave up. On the cliffs and in the forests of Sweden he sought strengthening and consolation in his deceived hopes and in his lost belief in the possibility of an independent, free Germany.

The more distant we become from them, the brighter do the images and experiences of youth appear against the dark background of age; the end touches the beginning as in old age we grow nearer again to our childhood. There are old men whose memory of their youth and manhood completely disappeared, whereas the time of their childhood again became their present so that they thought they were still children. I used to know an old man of nearly ninety who—at the very times he used to be summoned to school as a child—got up, took a little book under the arm and again, as when he was six, inexorably went off to school with it.

So light are they still in my memory, these sketches or experiences of my youth are also presented herein in their pure truth *without any poetic embellishment*.<sup>1</sup> I have been guilty of the latter only on one page, which I comment on in the very same place so as not to mislead the reader.

There are also no poems (no Poetry and Truth, no *Travel Shadows*<sup>1</sup>) to be found in these pages. They contain unadorned and true experiences; I should also point out that these pages have been transcribed just as they were printed three years ago, thus long before all the new political upheavals, without any political intention.

A preface that I wrote three years ago ended thusly:

“I am beginning to doubt that, even were I to live a little longer, my declining eyesight and sinking courage to face life, and the rush of medical business, would allow me the strength and leisure to follow these sketches from my boyhood with those from my youth and manhood. I look ahead to the future and I see black clouds forming about my head, and now they are pressing on my spirit like an approaching thunderstorm”

In a song entitled “*Prognostikon*,” which is included in the edition of my poems from 1841, it says:

“*Ferocious struggle soon sets in, / Death bringing also to the song!*”

Now, when this time of *ferocious* struggle has truly set in, I must repeat that doubt all the more.

May these pages, if only here and there, find someone weary of politics who will read them with that impartiality with which they were written!

*Weinsberg*, in May 1849.  
Justinus Kerner

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<sup>1</sup> Kerner is referring both to the subtitle of Goethe’s own autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (From My Life: Poetry and Truth, 1811-1833)—which covers his childhood to the time in 1775 when he was about to set out for Weimar—and to his own travel book, *Die Reiseschatten* (*Travel Shadows*, 1811).

**“Mein Geburt und erstes Leben in Ludwigsburg.  
Die Zeit Herzog Karls”**  
**(My Birth and Early Years in Ludwigsburg.  
The Time of Duke Karl)**

I was born in Ludwigsburg, one of the leading cities of Württemberg and a royal seat. The day of my birth was 18 September 1786.

My father was the high bailiff of the city with the title of state councillor. My parents had produced three sons and two daughters before me. On the day of my baptism, my father was at a loss as to what to name his fourth son. In his hesitancy, he looked at large oil paintings of the family—from his father to the Reformation—which hung on the walls of a small gallery. His gaze fell first on a picture of a man in priestly raiment with a long beard that was quite wide and cut at the bottom in a completely straight line that reached from his chin to his chest like a white napkin. This man bore the name Justinus Andreas, and he held the position of chief pastor in the town of Güglingen<sup>2</sup> in the year 1650. The same illustration of him is still on display in the church. My father named me Justinus Andreas after him, an uncommon name, but after my baptism my mother had serious reservations about it (although many of my forebears had the name Justinus). To set her mind at ease, my father had the very Christian name of Christian also inscribed in the church register, and it was by that name that I was usually called in our family circle.

Concerning that old Justinus, I should also mention that he once held the commission from the central religious authority in Stuttgart to betake himself to Lauffen<sup>3</sup> for the purpose of conducting an investigation into a ghostly apparition in the deanery there. The Lauffen dean had reported to the consistorium that he was no longer able to remain in his house after being pursued by a ghost. That other, old Justinus wanted it brought to light that the ghost was none other than the dean's living cook. The records of this investigation are still in the archive of the consistorium. This proves that I did not inherit the belief in the existence of spirits and that it is not connected with the name of Justinus Andreas.

On the day of my baptism my father moistened my lips with champagne, about which my good mother also often had reservations.

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<sup>2</sup> A small town in the Heilbronn district of Baden-Württemberg.

<sup>3</sup> A town near Heilbronn in Baden-Württemberg. It is known primarily as the birthplace of the poet Friedrich Hölderlin.

During my early childhood, Duke Karl Eugen still reigned. He had his summer residence in Ludwigsburg and during this period the sparsely populated streets, the lime and chestnut avenues of Ludwigsburg, were filled with courtiers in silk frocks, hairnets, and swords, and with the ducal military in resplendent uniforms and grenadier caps that put to shame the modest civilian dress of the other few residents. The splendid palace with its broad plazas and gardens near the park with the small so-called Favorit Palace, the shadow-filled avenues with lime and chestnut trees that ran in wide rows into the city and there formed the loveliest shadowy lanes full of blossoms and fragrances, the great wide marketplace of the city itself, with its arcades, often served as the stage for the entertainments of this pleasure-loving duke, for celebrations that are remembered to this very day, and that appear to one only as colorful dreams. In the Favorit, located opposite the castle, the grandest fireworks displays took place, at a cost that was the equal of the court at Versailles. At the lake near the city, festivals were held at which pretty town girls were obliged to appear as queens of the lake. In his early years, the duke often created magic gardens in the winter in which his birthday fell similar to those in the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*. In the middle of fall, he ordered an immense building of glass erected over the loveliest orange garden 1000 feet long and a hundred feet wide in order to protect it against the effects of winter. Its walls radiated the heat of countless stoves. The entire vault of the large building wore the prettiest green and it hung in the air in such a way that not a single pole was noticeable. Here orange trees bent under the weight of their fruit. As in autumn, one walked through vineyards full of grapes, and vegetable trees displayed their own rich fruits. Other orange trees bent into arbors. The entire garden formed a fresh foliation. More than thirty pools splashed their cool water, and 100,000 gas lamps formed a splendid heaven of stars above and illuminated the loveliest flowerbeds below.

In this magic garden the most magnificent spectacles, dramatic performances, ballets, and musical pieces by the greatest masters of the time were presented. That was still the time of this duke's *tempestuous* period when once during such a festival, in less than five minutes, he distributed among the ladies present 50,000 talers worth of presents of tasteful jewelry.

Venetian fairs were held in the great marketplace, and on the grounds of the town hall, the house of my birth. The great marketplace was covered with cloths like tents. Merchants and shoppers were masked. It was a colorful riot of masks where the most fantastic acts and games were offered among which by no means the strongest featured the Herculean